

Message Text

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ACTION ARA-10

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SUBJ: THE WEEK IN COLOMBIA

1. SUMMARY. COLOMBIA'S TWO "TRADITIONAL" POLITICAL PARTIES BEGAN THEIR QUESTS FOR VOTES IN THE APR 18 MID-TERM ELECTIONS. THE PROFUSION OF FACTIONS AND REPORTS OF ALLIANCES AMONG THE GROUPINGS GAVE PROOF THAT POLITICS, AS PRACTICED IN COLOMBIA, IS ALIVE AND WELL. INCIDENTS OF VIOLENCE IN VARIOUS PARTS OF THE NATION PUT DOUBT THE LIFING OF THE STATE OF SIEGE WHICH HAD BEEN EXPECTED DURING THE CURRENT MONTH. FOUR OF THE EIGHT PERSONS ACCUSED OF THE ASSASSINATION OF GENERAL RINCON WERE CONVICTED BY A MILITARY COURT. PANAMANIAN LEADER TORRIJOS VISITED COLOMBIA FOR TWO DAYS. BOTH HE AND PRESIDENT LOPEZ AVOIDED CONTROVERSY IN THEIR PUBLIC STATEMENTS. END SUMMARY.

2. MID-TERM ELECTION CAMPAIGN BEGINS. POLITICAL ACTIVITY IN PREPARATION FOR THE APR 18 MID-TERM ELECTIONS INTENSIFIED AS VARIOUS PARTIES AND FACTIONS JOCKEYED FOR POSITION OR BEGAN
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ACTIVE CAMPAIGNING. ALTHOUGH ONLY DEPARTMENTAL ASSEMBLIES

AND CITY COUNCILS ARE AT STAKE, THE ELECTIONS ARE WIDELY VIEWED AS AN IMPORTANT TEST FOR THE 1978 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION. CONTENDING LIBERAL PARTY FACTIONS AND POTENTIAL CANDIDATES HOPE TO SHOW THEIR STRENGTH AND TO GAIN INFLUENCE AT THE 1977 CONVENTION WHICH WILL NOMINATE A PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE. AT PRESENT THE RACE APPEARS TO BE BETWEEN FORMER PRESIDENT CARLOS LLERAS AND WASHINGTON AMBASSADOR TURBAY. PRESIDENT LOPEZ, WHO CANNOT SUCCEED HIMSELF, HAS REMAINED NEUTRAL TO DATE. FOR CONSERVATIVES, THE OUTCOME OF THE ELECTION MAY DETERMINE WHETHER THEIR PARTY WILL RUN ITS OWN CANDIDATE. SOME CONSERVATIVES HAVE SAID PRIVATELY THAT UNLESS THE PARTY ROLLS AT LEAST 40 PERCENT OF THE VOTES IN APRIL (AS COMPARED WITH THEIR 33 PERCENT SHOWING IN THE 1974 ELECTION) IT MIGHT NOT FIELD ITS OWN PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE IN 1978. CONSERVATIVES DO NOT RULE OUT THE POSSIBILITY OF JOINING WITH A DISSIDENT LIBERAL CANDIDATE IN 1978. THE MOST LIKELY RECIPIENT OF CONSERVATIVE SUPPORT WOULD BE CARLOS LLERAS.

3. FORMER PRESIDENT LLERAS, MEANWHILE, OFFICIALLY OPENED HIS CAMPAIGN TO "CAPTURE BOGOTA", TO WHICH HE HAS GIVEN HIGH PRIORITY BECAUSE OF THE NUMBER OF VOTES INVOLVED AS WELL AS THE PSYCHOLOGICAL VALUE WHICH A VICTORY IN THE CAPITAL WOULD CARRY. IN MEDELLIN, AN ATTEMPT BY LLERAS TO DOMINATE THE CITY'S LIBERAL ORGANIZATION BY ABSORBING TWO LIBERAL FACTIONS FAILED AND BOTH FACTIONS SUBSEQUENTLY UNITED UNDER THE "FIRST FORCE" SUPPORTERS OF PRESIDENT LOPEZ. CONSERVATIVES, WHOSE PARTY IS ALSO RIVEN BY PERSONALIST DIVISIONS, WERE HEARTENED BY A SHOW OF UNITY AND COOPERATION BY EX-PRESIDENT OSPINA AND FORMER PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE GOMEZ AS CONSERVATIVE LEADERS BEGAN TO ACTIVELY CAMPAIGN.

4. THE SECURITY SITUATION AND THE STATE OF SIEGE. ALL BUT ONE OF COLOMBIA'S GOVERNORS SUPPORTED PRESIDENT LOPEZ'S ANNOUNCED INTENTION TO LIFT THE STATE OF SIEGE (75 BOGOTA 12222) IN A MTG WITH HIM LAST WEEKEND. ANTIOQUIA'S GOVERNOR CALLED FOR THE CONTINUATION OF THE STATE OF SIEGE. MINISTER OF GOVERNMENT CORNELIO REYES REPORTEDLY STATED THIS WEEK THAT THE STATE OF SIEGE WOULD BE LIFTED BY THE END OF THE MONTH. THOSE WHO BELIEVE CONDITIONS HAVE NOT IMPROVED SUFFICIENTLY TO WARRANT SUCH AN ACTION COULD FIND SUPPORT FOR THEIR VIEW IN THE RESURGENCE OF VIOLENCE IN VARIOUS PARTS OF THE COUNTRY. COLOMBIAN ARMED FORCES LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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WERE UNABLE TO FIND A REPORTED 1,000-MAN COMMUNIST GUERRILLA FORCE (FARC) WHICH KIDNAPED AND AND LATER RELEASED AN INTERCOL (ESSO) EMPLOYEE (BOGOTA 628). IN ADDITIONAL TO THE BOMBINGS IN BOGOTA (BELOW), CLASHES IN CALI BETWEEN BANK AND SUGAR REFINERY STRIKERS AND SECURITY FORCES CAUSED THE DEATH OF A YOUTH AND SEVERAL INJURIES. CALI WAS UNDER MARTIAL LAW FOR A DAY. IN MEDELLIN, STUDENTS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ANTIOQUIA STAGED A 24-HOUR STRIKE IN SYMPATHY WITH THEIR COUNTER-

PARTS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MEDELLIN, WHICH THE GOVERNMENT CLOSED LATE LAST YEAR FOR PROLONGED DISTURBANCES. STUDENTS THREW MOLOTOV COCKTAILS AT PASSING CARS AND STARTED A FIRE AT A NEARBY STORE. IN PASTO, STUDENTS AND TEACHERS, PROTESTING THE DISMISSAL OF SEVERAL HUNDRED RECENTLY-HIRED TEACHERS, CLASHED WITH SECURITY FORCES. THE GOC ALSO FACED AT LEAST TWO OTHER POTENTIALLY EXPLOSIVE ISSUES. UNDER A RECENTLY ENACTED EDUCATION LAW, THE GOVERNMENT BEGAN NATIONWIDE NEGOTIATIONS WITH THE MAOIST-LED TEACHERS UNION (FECODE). EARLY IN THE YEAR THE GOC ANNOUNCED A LIMIT OF 15 PERCENT ON SALARY INCREASES FOR PUBLIC EMPLOYEES. FECODE IS DEMANDING 50 PERCENT. MEANWHILE, THE INDEPENDENT, BUT EXTREMIST PETROLEUM WORKERS UNION (USO) ANNOUNCED PREPARATIONS FOR ANOTHER CIVIC STRIKE IN BARRANCABERMEJA TO PROTEST THE FAILURE OF THE GOVERNMENT TO BUILD THE WATER AND SEWER SYSTEMS WHICH WERE PROMISED LAST YEAR FOLLOWING A SERIES OF SOMETIMES VIOLENT PROTESTS. THE UNSETTLED SECURITY SITUATION MAY FURTHER DELAY A LIFTING OF THE STATE OF SIEGE, TO WHICH PRESIDENT LOPEZ IS COMMITTED IN ORDER TO PERMIT MAXIMUM FREEDOM OF CAMPAIGN ACTIVITY FOR THE MID-TERM ELECTIONS.

5. COURT MARTIAL CONVICTS FOUR IN GENERAL RINCON ASSASSINATION.

THE COURT MARTIAL OF EIGHT MEN ACCUSED OF THE ASSASSINATION OF ARMY GENERAL RINCON *BOGOTA 246) ENDED JAN 21 WITH THE CONVICTION OF FOUR OF THE ACCUSED. SENTENCING WILL TAKE PLACE ON JAN 28 AND A REVIEW BY THE SUPERIOR MILITARY COURT WILL OCCUR WITHIN A MONTH. NATIONAL POLICE COMMANDER GENERAL GARCIA BOHORQUEZ TOLD EMBASSY OFFICER THAT THE MILITARY WERE SATISFIED WITH THE OUTCOME OF THE TRIAL. THE VERDICT WILL TEND TO ABATE MILITARY CONCERN OVER WHAT IT HAS VIEWED AS THE IMPUNITY WITH WHICH CRIMINAL ELEMENTS OPERATE. IF THE STATE OF SIEGE IS LIFTED BEFORE THE SUPERIOR MILITARY COURT REVIEW, HOWEVER, THE REVIEW WOULD BE TURNED OVER TO THE CIVIL COURTS WHICH MIGHT WELL FREE THE CONVICTED MEN.

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SUCH

AN EVENTUALITY WOULD CAUSE INCREASED DISCONTENT IN THE MILITARY. THE NIGHT OF THE ANNOUNCEMENT OF THE VERDICT TWO SMALL BOMBS EXPLODED IN BOGOTA. THE COMMANDING GENERAL OF THE BOGOTA GARRISON TOLD THE PRESS THAT THE BOMBS WERE TERRORIST ACTS CONNECTED WITH THE COURT MARTIAL DECISION AND WERE PROOF THAT THE ACCUSED WERE INDEED GUILTY.

6. TORRIJOS VISIT TO COLOMBIA. PANAMANIAN LEADER OMAR TORRIJOS MET SEVERAL TIMES WITH PRESIDENT LOPEZ DURING THE FORMER'S JAN 19-21 VISIT TO COLOMBIA. THE STATED PURPOSE OF THE VISIT WAS TO TAKE PART IN THE FOUR HUNDREDTH ANNIVERSARY OF ROLDANILLO, THE BIRTHPLACE OF TORRIJOS FATHER. BOTH LEADERS AVOIDED CONTROVERSY IN THEIR PUBLIC STATEMENTS. FONOFF SOURCES, HOWEVER, SAY THAT, IN THE COURSE OF THEIR PRIVATE MEETINGS, LOPEZ AND TORRIJOS

ADDRESSED THE MAJOR PROBLEMS OF THE REGION. SHORTLY AFTER THE MEETING, SOURCES AT THE COLOMBIAN DEFENSE MINISTRY DENIED PRESS REPORTS (UPI) STATING THAT THE GOC HAD PLEDGED MILITARY SUPPORT TO PANAMA.
VAKY

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